

Mary T. McMains. The sister, the object, the moral compass, and the exposition fairy: Trends in the portrayal of African American teenage girls in contemporary young adult literature. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. April, 2013. 34 pages. Advisor: Sandra Hughes-Hassell.

African American adolescent females are looking for representations of themselves in the young adult titles they read. Looking at a database of recommended titles and a popular teen series, the main objective of this study is to perform a content analysis on contemporary young adult titles that feature female African American characters. Specifically this study hopes to provide insight into how adolescent African American females are represented in contemporary young adult literature. Findings suggest that when an adolescent African American female is in a main role, they are portrayed as multidimensional and complex. However, adolescent African American females in supporting roles are underdeveloped and tend to fall into one of four types: the sister role, the object of affection role, the moral compass role, or the expositor role.

Headings:

Young adult literature--History & criticism

Content analysis--Young adults' literature

African Americans

THE SISTER, THE OBJECT, THE MORAL COMPASS, AND THE
EXPOSITION FAIRY: TRENDS IN THE PORTRAYAL OF AFRICAN AMERICAN
TEENAGE GIRLS IN CONTEMPORARY YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

by
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Introduction

In the fall of 2012, I was placed at the Wake Young Women's Leadership Academy media center for a field experience. It was my first time being in a school since graduating from my private, and predominantly white high school, since 2003. WYWLA is extremely diverse in terms of race and socioeconomic status. Part of the school's mission was enrolling girls who are first generation college-bound; half of the student body meets that criteria. The girls come from a variety of racial backgrounds; we have students who are African-American, Asian, Caucasian, and Indian. Working in the media center, I was interested to see what kind of titles the girls would be picking out. Whenever they would ask me for book picks, I would be quick to suggest my favorite reads as a teen. I would pull titles like Sarah Dessen's *Someone Like You* and Megan McCafferty's *Sloppy Firsts*, only to have some of the girls look at the covers and immediately hand them back. Confused, I finally asked a seventh grader why she was rejecting the books. Handing it over, she said, "That girl doesn't look like me." And she was right; the headless girl on the cover was white and the seventh grader was black.

When I was a teenager, my literary go-tos were titles that featured girls just like me: white and middle class suffering from suburbia ennui. I never went for the Walter Dean Myers and Jacqueline Woodson's of the world because why what did their characters' experiences in the inner city have anything to do with me? But many of my students are coming from a poor, urban background and I can't help but wonder how

their counterparts in books are being portrayed. When I hand a Sharon Flake novel over to that seventh grader, is she able to see herself in that book?

Literature Review

“Gentle doses of racism”: A historical survey of African American children’s and adolescent literature

In 1965, Nancy Larrick published her now landmark essay on the inherent whiteness of children’s literature. In it she surveyed over 5,000 children’s books that were published from 1962-1964 to determine how many of these books contained African American characters. She further studied how these characters were portrayed in the stories. She found that African Americans were woefully underrepresented in children’s books and that those featured were either stereotypical “ridiculous stock characters” or they were the counter stereotype, characters possessing “unsurpassed grace and beauty, poetic language, great wisdom, and unfaltering judgment” (Larrick, 1965). These portrayals were neither multidimensional nor realistic.

Larrick’s essay was riding on the wave of the civil rights movement; publishers began to notice the large potential market in publishing for minorities. The late ‘60s and ‘70s saw an increase in urban fiction where themes included the strength and resilience of black communities, the inherent poetry of the language, and had complex characterizations (Foster, 1995). In 1970, the first Coretta Scott King award was given out for Excellency in African American children’s books (Bernd, 1995). However, even now the availability of African American children’s and young adult literature is largely dependent on the national interest in African Americans (Foster, 1995). African American writers being published decrease when African American political activity

decreases (Kiah, 1995). There is concern that publishing for African-Americans is still considered trendy (Pride, 2008) and that the fad will turn into irrelevance. A recent study lamented the lack of titles for African American teens to choose from; the study looked at the ALA Quick Picks and Best Books for Teens from 2000-2005 and found that only nineteen out of 241 titles featured an African American main character (Younker, 2005). Another study that looked at award winning young adult fiction, teen selected top fiction and bestselling young adult fiction found that non-white female protagonists are underrepresented in titles that fall in these categories (Rawson 2011).

Reflections of self: Adolescents and motivation for reading

Studies have shown that adolescents like books with characters like themselves (Hughes-Hassell, 2007). Adolescents enjoy reading books with teenage protagonists (Foster, 1995) their own age (Ivey, 2001) and need continuous opportunities to see themselves and their racial group in realistic settings and hopefully a positive light (Kiah, 1995). They like realistic fiction books set in the United States that are multicultural (reflecting their own lives), believable, appealing and without stereotypes (Younker, 2005). Adolescents will choose to read for inspiration in their own lives (Ivey, 2001). In terms of gender, girls prefer literature where they can empathize with characters and relate the character's feelings with their own (Simpson, 1996). Adolescent African American females in particular are "searching for representatives of themselves, irrespective of the positive or negative attributes of those characters" (Gibson, 2010). They are approaching books with characters like themselves as "guides for life" (Gibson, 2010). During adolescence, girls become "silenced" and disconnected from themselves (Iglesias, 2002). It is then vital for girls to have these guidebooks that have characters

like themselves to give them a voice. These books and discussion of the books can act as transformative spaces for adolescent females to figure out their social and emotional issues (Polleck, 2010).

Developmentally, literacy must be developed and exercised by literature that reflects the realities of African American culture (Foster, 1995). While there has been an increase in books published featuring African American characters, as well as books published aimed for minority readers, the percentages are still low. The Children's Cooperative Book Center found that out of an estimated 5,000 children's books published in 2012 only 119 were about African Americans ("Children's Books By," 2012). Also, the multicultural titles that are being published and are selected by schools for classroom reading are often historical, which makes it hard for youths to relate to the characters. Popular young adult author Coe Booth noted in an interview, "The books we were forced to read that had black people in them I didn't relate to them. As a little black girl growing up in the Bronx, I had no connection to share croppers or those books that took place in the 50s" (Doll, 2012).

There have been criticisms leveled against African American female characters. In urban fiction, the portrayals often promote negative stereotypes such as the African American female as hypersexual, materialistic, superficial, vindictive, and obsessed with appearance (Stovall, 2005). Scholars complain about the dearth of multidimensional African American female characters in texts; they fear that as a result of there being so few texts readily available that readers can't discriminate against readings containing stereotypical portrayals (Gibson, 2010).

African American literature for teaching black culture

Many scholars have debated the responsibilities of telling an African American tale. For instance, prolific author Walter Dean Myer once said, “I want to tell Black children about their humanity and about their history and how to grease their legs so the ask won’t show and how to braid their hair so it’s easy to comb on frost winters mornings” (Foster, 1995). To Myers, and many other authors, telling an African American character’s story and describing African American culture are intrinsically linked.

Rosalie Black Kiah outlined three components that comprise the African-American experience that are usually found in African-American Literature (Kiah, 1995). These components include: the patrimony of Africa (the African heritage), the patrimony of domination and dependency (focusing on the historical powerlessness and disenfranchisement of the African American people), and the patrimony of survival (the strength and resilience of the African American people). She argued that these components make a piece of literature African American literature and that it is the responsibility of African American authors to write about their own experiences.

Study Objectives

The main objective of this study is to perform a content analysis on contemporary young adult titles that feature African American female characters. Specifically this study hopes to provide insight into how adolescent African American females are represented in contemporary young adult literature. In young adult titles, what do adolescent African American female characters look like? Are there any trends among the portrayals? Are the portrayals multidimensional and complex, or are they stereotyped and marginalized within the story?

Operational Definitions

For this study the following operational definitions were used:

Adolescent: a person who is ten to seventeen years of age

African American: black Americans growing up in the United States (Sims, 1982)

Contemporary: This definition is two fold: the books were published sometime between 2000-2013 and the setting of the book is modern day.

Young Adult Literature: fiction written for and marketed to ten to eighteen year olds

Characters: characters that have a speaking role and appear more than once

Methodology

Title selection

Two sources were used to select the titles for this content analysis: a database of recommended titles and a popular teen series. The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), a research library at the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, maintains a current book database that is comprised of titles that are recommended by the CCBC; the database currently has 6705 titles. According to its vision statement, the center is "committed to identifying excellent literature for children and adolescents and bringing this literature to the attention of those adults who have an academic, professional, or career interest in connecting young readers with books." The CCBC librarians, out of the extremely large pool of published young adult and children's literature, handpick the titles for the database.

The CCBC database is easily searchable with advanced book search facets. Using these, it was simple to find a list of titles to use for the purpose of this content analysis. The following facets were used to compile the book list: fiction (under the genre facet), fiction for YA books (under the CCBC choices facet), middle school age 11-14 and high

school age 14 and older (under the age ranges facet), and African/African-American (under the multicultural categories facet). This search yielded sixty results. From these results, short story collections and graphic novels were removed. Then, by reading the books descriptions published by the CCBC, titles were selected that mentioned an adolescent female in the book description. Because of the research objectives, books that are set in contemporary America were chosen. In keeping with the contemporary theme, only titles that were published in 2000-present were considered. With these parameters, only eight titles remained. Two of these titles were eventually eliminated from consideration; one-featured Haitian-American female characters as opposed to African American and the other featured no African American characters (it is assumed that it was in the database under the original search parameters due to the author being African American). The following titles were used in this study: *Game* by Walter Dean Myers, *Liar* by Justine Larbalestier, *Lockdown* by Walter Dean Myers, *Mare's Way* by Tanita S. Davis, *Money Hungry* by Sharon Flake, and *Silhouetted by the Blue* by Traci L. Jones,

It should be noted the dearth of titles suggested by the CCBC that fit the criteria for the study. In Larrick's study, she noted that most of the titles she looked at that featured African American characters were set outside of the continental United States or before World War II (Larrick, 1965). As a result, these titles were showing a way of life that is far removed from what contemporary readers experience in their own lives. Adolescents prefer reading contemporary novels as opposed to historical fiction (Ivey, 2001). Surprisingly, most of the titles recommended by the CCBC under the search facets used in this study were historical, with them being set in the past from the Civil Rights movement on back. If teens are looking for engaging books with characters like

them, then it appears there is a void of literary titles featuring African American female teens in a contemporary setting. The publishing industry has started to notice the demand for literature geared at African American teens, but these titles tend to be street lit or a part of an urban series (Pride, 2008), and therefore considered less “literary,” and do not appear as often in databases like the CCBC’s.

The CCBC titles represent the “best” of African-American fiction for middle and high school aged teenagers according to the CCBC. In order to get a better range of the available literature, as well as more popular titles, six titles from the Bluford series were selected. The following titles were used in this study: *The Bully* by Paul Langan, *The Gun* by Paul Langan, *A Matter of Trust* by Anne Schraff, *Lost and Found* Anne Schraff, *Secrets in the Shadows* by Anne Schraff, and *Someone to Love Me* by Anne Schraff.

The Bluford series is a collection of twenty titles set in the fictional, inner-city school Bluford High. In recent years there has been an influx of multicultural series targeting minority demographics. These series tend to be popular among teens that like ongoing series, as opposed to stand-alone titles, revolving around characters like them in a high school setting (Pride 2008). Though educators and librarians would love it if teens were gravitating towards “respectable” literature for leisure reading, the truth is that adolescents are seeking out urban fiction (Gibson, 2010). The Bluford series was one of the first profitable series to come out in the 2000s; due to a unique marketing strategy by its publishers, Scholastic and Townsend Publishers, the titles were sold for one dollar to school and public libraries. Over eight million copies of the titles in the series have been sold or donated since the first titles release in 2001 (Campbell, 2011). Titles in the series have appeared on various YALSA booklists for popularity and for reluctant readers. The

series is not without its criticisms, mainly concerning its mature content (Campbell, 2011). The Bluford series was chosen for this study due to its availability in many schools and its ensuring popularity among minority youths. Due to time constraints and repetitive nature of the titles, only the first six titles in the series were analyzed for this study.

Out of the twelve titles, seven of them had an African American female adolescent as the main character. There were nineteen supporting African American female adolescent characters in the titles studied. It should be noted that the Bluford series contains nine African American female adolescent characters that reappear throughout the six books looked at. These characters were only counted once to come up with the total. Of the twenty-two characters looked at, only six of them told the stories from their points of view.

Table 1 shows the study sample. For a complete list of titles, synopses, and characters studied see Appendix A.

Title	Author	Characters studied
<i>Game</i>	Myers, Walter Dean	Jocelyn Larson
<i>Liar</i>	Larbalestier, Justine	Micah Wilkins (POV), Sarah Washington
<i>Lockdown</i>	Myers, Walter Dean	Isis "Icy" Anderson
<i>Mare's Way</i>	Davis, Tanita S.	Octavia Boylen (POV), Tali Boylen
<i>Money Hungry</i>	Flake, Sharon	Raspberry Hill (POV), Zora Mitchell, Ja'nae, Mai
<i>Silhouetted by the Blue</i>	Jones, Traci L.	Serena Shaw (POV), Candice Rudolph, Nikka, Cat
<i>The Bully</i> (Bluford High #5)	Langan, Paul	Amberlynn Bailey, Jamee Wills
<i>The Gun</i> (Bluford High #6)	Langan, Paul	Amberlynn Bailey, Jamee Wills, Lark Collins
<i>Lost and Found</i> (Bluford High #1)	Schraff, Anne	Darcy Wills (POV), Jamee Wills, Tarah Carson,

		Brisana Meeks
<i>A Matter of Trust</i> (Bluford High #2)	Schraff, Anne	Darcy Wills (POV), Tarah Carson, Brisana Meeks, Jamee Wills
<i>Secrets in the Shadows</i> (Bluford High #3)	Schraff, Anne	Amberlynn Bailey, Korie Archer, Tarah Carson, Darcy Wills, Brisana Meeks
<i>Someone to Love Me</i> (Bluford High #4)	Schraff, Anne	Cindy Gibson (POV), Jamee Wills, Amberlynn Bailey, Darcy Wills

Coding process

The characters were analyzed by coding certain attributes. Areas focused on included: basic character information, education, crime, stressors, family/home life, friends, aspirations/dreams, and love relationships (see Appendix A). Coding was built on measures used in Elasmr et al. (2009) regarding portrayal of women in the media, Gerbner (1981) regarding cultural indicators, Kiah (1995) regarding the components of African American literature, and Yosso (2005) regarding community cultural wealth.

Study	Code contribution
Elasmr, M. et al. (1999). The portrayal of women in U.S. primetime television.	Drinking and drug usage, home life, definition of main role, definition of supporting role
Gerbner, G. (1981). <i>Cultural Indicators Project, TV Message Analysis</i>	Crime, violence, and acts of aggression
Kiah, R. (1995). African-American women writers of adolescent literature.	Socioeconomic status and indicators
Yosso, T. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth.	Self-efficacy, self-perception of race

Findings

Character information and family and home life

Of the characters looked at, 41% come from single parent households, 32% come from a two parent household, 9% have no parents and are living with a grandparent, and 18% are unknown, meaning the character's family life is never mentioned.

In terms of living arrangements, 77% of the characters had explicit living situations mentioned. Of these, 53% lived in apartments, 12% lived in high quality apartments such as a penthouse or condo, and 27% lived in a house. In terms of socioeconomic status, 50% were described as poor, 22% were described as lower middle class, 17% were described as middle class, and 11% were described as wealthy. All but one of the books took place in an urban setting, while the remaining book was set on a cross county road trip with the two characters featured coming from a suburban background. None of the books took place in a rural setting or featured characters coming from a rural background.

Thirty-two percent of the characters held jobs, while 68% did not. Of the jobs held, 43% babysat regularly, 43% worked odd jobs, and 14% worked in the family business. In terms of hobbies or activities conducted for relaxation or recreational purposes, only 41% of the characters were mentioned liking or participating in particular interest while 59% had no interest mentioned. Of the interests or hobbies mentioned, 41% enjoyed singing, 5% enjoyed drawing, 5% enjoyed reading, 5% enjoyed running, 5% enjoyed cheerleading, and 5% enjoyed jumping rope.

Crime and stressors

Of the characters studied, 23% were victims of a crime. Of these, the majority were violent crimes such as the characters being victims of drive-by shootings, assault, and robbery. Thirty-six percent of the characters committed a crime. These crimes range

from violent (assault, robbery) to nonviolent (truancy, underage driving, breaking and entering, shoplifting). Majorities of 77% of the characters display verbal aggression towards another character, such as yelling.

Love relationships

A majority of 73% of the characters studied showed a romantic interest in another character. Of these, 88% showed an interest or had a relationship with a male, while 12% expressed a dominant preference in males but had a sexual encounter with another female character. None of the characters identified as lesbian or bisexual. Of the characters that had a romantic interest or relationship through the course of their storyline, 63% had one boyfriend, 25% had one crush, and 13% had two boyfriends. Only 9% of all of the characters were sexually active.

Aspirations and dreams

Only 23% discussed life post high school graduation, whether in terms of plans for college or future careers. Only 41% of the characters mention a goal and are seen working towards it. Fifty-nine percent of the characters do not have any goals mentioned.

Discussion

Trends among main characters

Overall, the main female characters, again those characters telling the story from their points of view, were well rounded in their development. Much information is given about each of these characters in different contexts so that the reader comes to feel like they really know them. In all of the novels, except for *Mare's Way*, the plot takes place during a school year. These protagonists are seen in a school setting, in their home lives,

and also during their recreational time; even in *Mare's Way*, which takes place over a summer, the protagonists' school lives are described. *Money Hungry* follows Raspberry Hill through her school day to her afterschool odd jobs and hanging out with her girlfriends to going home to the projects. By showing Raspberry in all of these different contexts, the reader gets multiple opportunities to see the character deal with different situations and people; it makes the character more realistic, and therefore more relatable and a more accurate reflection of the reader.

Also adding to their multi-dimensionality, all seven of the protagonists had clear dreams and aspirations and were shown working towards attaining their goals throughout their stories. For instance, Micah, the main protagonist from *Liar*, hopes to become a biologist; throughout the novel she is seen working hard in her Biology class as well as forming a mentor/mentee relationship with her biology teacher. She eventually makes it to college by the end of the novel. Some teens choose to read to find inspiration in their own lives; a character like Micah is appealing to a reader because she has a dream and works hard to attain it.

Next, all of the main characters were complex emotionally running through a wide range of emotions throughout the stories. Serena Shaw, from *Silhouetted by the Blue*, for example, is dealing with multiple stressors: family, school, friends, love relationships, and in her recreational life. She has ups and downs in all of these areas and displays love, anger, excitement, hope, and sadness when dealing. Just like Serena has a myriad of emotions, so does the reader; this makes Serena a relatable character to the reader.

These main characters do not suffer from the criticisms Larrick made against African American characters in children's literature. They are neither "ridiculous stock characters" or characters possessing "great wisdom and unfaltering judgment" (Larrick, 1965). Instead, they are all well-rounded and complex characters, making good and bad decisions as they navigate their way through adolescence; this makes them realistic and therefore easier for the reader to connect with.

Trends among supporting characters

A supporting character is defined as having a speaking role and appearing more than once in the story. Out of the twelve titles, there were nineteen supporting African American female adolescent characters. For the majority of these titles looked at, the supporting characters seem to fall into a specific role meant to service the main character or plot. The characters were either present in the story to act as an object of desire to the main character, be a moral compass, provide necessary exposition to move the plot forward, or was a sister of the main character. What's interesting is that the characters rarely fulfilled more than one of these roles. These trends occurred in all of the Bluford High books, as well as the two CCBC picks that were told from an adolescent male perspective. In the Bluford books, three were told from a male perspective, and therefore all of the female characters fell into one of these types. The other three Bluford books were told from two females' perspectives. When these two, Darcy and Cindy, were the main characters of their stories, they emerged as fully realized characters. However, when both appear in subsequent Bluford books, they exhibit none of that complexity and both fall into the supporting character trap.

In both of the CCBC books with a male protagonist, both by Walter Dean Myers, there were only two adolescent African American female characters, one per title. In both, the female characters filled the sister role. Both were younger sisters and were seen as an angelic figure beloved by the protagonist. There was no hint of her leading her own life independent of her brother; in both stories, she shows up to either offer gentle ribbing to her brother or provide support during stressful time. As a result, this type emerges as a sounding board rather than a fully developed character. One character from the Bluford series fit into this sister role as well; Amberlynn Bailey is prominently featured in *Secrets in the Shadows*, which is told from her brother Roylin's point of view. However, as opposed to Myers' sister characters, Amberlynn is more verbally aggressive with Roylin and yells at him on a number of occasions. This display of anger does add complexity to the character, as opposed to her being angelic all of the time; however, she doesn't receive much character development throughout the story. The reader is never told much about her outside of the fact that her brother sometimes sees her as a pesky little sister.

Characters acting as an object of desire were another trend among the supporting female characters in the Bluford titles featuring a male perspective. Characters in this role were often only described in physical appearance by the male protagonist, with no mention of non-superficial aspects. In *Secrets of the Shadows*, for example, the protagonist Roylin Bailey develops a crush on new girl Korie Archer at first sight: "Her skin looked like satin, and she had huge dark eyes shadowed by long lashes. Her slight pouting lips were smooth, full, and red." Later on, Roylin becomes obsessed with buying a necklace for Korie:

"If he got that necklace for Korie, she would almost belong to him...It would not

matter how many better-looking, smoother guys came along to hit on her. She would owe it to Roylin to be his girl.”

From this passage, it's clear Roylin sees Korie as an object that he can possess. Roylin eventually decides to steal the money he needs from a friendly elderly neighbor to purchase the necklace for Korie. At this point, Roylin has only known Korie for one day. Nothing is known about her except that she is very attractive. Throughout the story, she receives no further character development, except that she likes shiny things. The reader has no idea what her true feelings and intentions towards Roylin are; instead, all that is focused on are Roylin's feelings and perception of her. Granted, since the story is told from his point of view it makes sense that his feelings would be the main focus; but the reader has no idea why Roylin goes to such lengths to be in a relationship with Korie except that she is very attractive. This results in Korie being a one-dimensional character.

The moral compass type is a character that appears in the story to tell the protagonist a hard truth and lead them to make good choices in tough situations. Lark Collins is a character introduced in the sixth Bluford book, *The Gun*. Unlike other Bluford High characters, she does not reappear in any of the other titles studied. Tyra Hobbs, the protagonist of *The Gun*, strikes up a friendship with Lark in order to manipulate her into giving him money to purchase a gun in order to get revenge on another student. When Lark realizes he has been using her she doesn't get mad but instead shows disappointment and concern that he felt the need to manipulate her. Later, when she realizes he has purchased a gun to scare a student, she pleads with him to talk out the problem rather than use violence. What makes Lark's character one dimensional, as opposed to a complex but moral character, is that absolutely nothing else is known about

her. Her home life is never mentioned, nor any aspect of her life outside of Bluford. She appears to have no hobbies or any dreams. She only shows up in the story to talk to Tyray and give advice. African American adolescent females need positive role models (Davis, 2009) and having a character like Lark who consistently makes good decisions could be one such example. However, because she lacks dimensionality, she comes across as unrealistic and therefore is not relatable to the reader.

The expositor fills the role of moving the plot along by showing up to give necessary exposition. Jamee Wills is a supporting character in all of the Bluford series studied. She has a more prominent role in the first two books as her sister, Darcy, is the main protagonist in these titles. In these two books she fulfills the sister role. But in the other four, she only shows up in the story to provide exposition. In *Someone to Love Me*, she reminds Cindy, and therefore the audience, that Cindy's new boyfriend is possessive and abusive. In *The Bully*, Jamee only speaks in one scene; the protagonist, Darrell has a crush on a girl but doesn't know how to proceed. Conveniently, Jamee appears as he thinks this and tells him that the girl likes him back. Her interjection is needed to move the plot along and give Darrell motivation to speak to his crush, but it comes out of nowhere since the reader knows nothing about Jamee except that she appears to be on friendly terms with Darrell's love interest.

As mentioned before, all of the African American female adolescent supporting characters in the Bluford series filled one of these roles. None of them were any further developed; they did not talk about themselves, their interests, or dreams nor were their home lives and family dynamics ever explored. This lack of complexity makes for one-dimensional characters.

Issues of race and racial identity

Another trend was the lack of description of African-American culture in these books. In fact, only three books went in depth into African-American culture and how the characters view themselves in the context of race. Interestingly enough only two characters struggled with issues of race and identity and both were the only biracial characters in the study. Micah is a seventeen-year-old girl with a Caucasian, French-born mother and an African-American father. Though her self-discovery of her racial identity is not the main focus of the novel, she refers to her dual race in moments of insecurity:

“All the white kids sit together. All the white kids with money I mean...Most of the white kids don’t believe in God; most of us black kids do. I’m undecided, stuck somewhere inbetween, same way I am with everything: half black, half white...coasting on half a scholarship. I’m half of everything.”

Though she is black and white, in this passage she is grouping herself with her black classmates through the use of “us.” Yet, though out the novel she is constantly shown sitting alone, unable to identify with either group.

The other biracial character studied was Mai, a supporting character from *Money Hungry*. Mai is a thirteen-year-old girl, half-Korean and half-African American. Though her family is seen as celebrating both races in her home life, Mai firmly identifies as black and becomes angry anytime anyone says otherwise. When in a fight with her best friend she says, “I ain’t mixed. I’m black...like you.” The protagonist of the story, Raspberry Hill, reflects:

“I don’t know why Ja’nae even goes there. She knows how Mai feels about her mixed race, and how Ming (Mai’s brother) feels about being mixed, too. Ming don’t want to be called black, African American, or Korean. He says he’s biracial. Mai don’t want to be called Korean or biracial. She’s black. Call her anything different, and she will go off on you.”

Later, after a fight with her parents, Mai says, with sadness, “I look like myself...Not nobody else. Just me.” Like Micah, Mai’s biracial identity causes her to feel isolated from her peers. Both Micah and Mai feel the need to identify with just one race.

These biracial portrayals are accurate reflections of how many biracial teens see themselves and the identity struggles they go through. Studies have shown that biracial youth struggle with their identities and that they often internalize these struggles that can result in self-hatred and low self-esteem (Anderson, 1995). It should be noted that with both of these characters there are no easy answers given for how they should accept their racial identity. Neither goes through a development arc in the context of race; both show confusion and negativity towards their dual race throughout their entire stories. This seems realistic in that there are no easy answers, but by never showing them embrace their biracialism, it doesn’t provide much inspiration or comfort to a biracial reader.

Keeping in mind Roaslie Kiah’s ideas of what makes African-American literature, the novels studied possessed the patrimony of domination and dependence and the patrimony of survival components, but not the patrimony of Africa component. Kiah describes the first two components as novels possessing themes of powerlessness due to coming from oppression (Kiah 1995). As a result of this powerlessness, African American literature usually has a theme of survival that reflects the African American people ability to survive after being disenfranchised. The focus in many of the books studied, especially the Bluford high series, was on the characters survival through economic hardships. Nearly all of the characters in the Bluford series come from low-income households and are trying to survive in poverty. Darcy Wills, the main protagonist in the first two Bluford books, is shown struggling to take care of her

grandmother who suffers from dementia. Darcy's mother works nights and her father is estranged from the family. Therefore many of the household responsibilities fall on Darcy, such as taking care of her grandmother and preparing meals for the family.

Kiah said these books are usually set in the inner-city and that "the protagonist faces such problems as the lack of security of a strong supportive family, the threat of gang violence and drugs and the problems that are inherent with extreme poverty" (Kiah, 1995). The Bluford books, as well as the titles by Myers and Flake, meet Kiah's criteria. However, Kiah also says a theme of African American literature is the story acknowledging African heritage; this did not happen in many of the stories. In some, such as *Mare's Way* and *Silhouted by the Blue*, African American history and cultural pieces were discussed. In *Silhouted by the Blue*, Serena participates in a school production of *The Wiz*. In *Mare's Way*, the main characters visit Emancipation Park in Texas. However, in the Bluford series, the characters never acknowledge their race or heritage. In some ways it's progressive; young adult authors have been criticized for making "the blackness of the person the story" (Doll, 2012). Yet by only referring to race in character description, and not referring to heritage at all, the Bluford series lack depth. The Bluford series focuses on the ramifications of once being an oppressed people as Kiah describes, such as lack of opportunity, but doesn't discuss the heritage in a positive way, or really in any way. Therefore, it seems there is more of a focus on socioeconomic implications than racial.

Issues of sexuality and female friendships

Surprisingly, there was a lack of sexual content in the books analyzed. Granted, that is typically a benchmark of urban fiction rather than young adult literature, but even

the Bluford series, which is considered a “bridge” to urban fiction (Pride, 2008), didn’t have a huge focus on sexual content. Except for *Liar*, the books that were told from an African American adolescent female perspective featured no overt sexual content. The characters in these books showed desire for the opposite sex and embarked on tentative relationships with them, but the most graphic it got was kissing. In the past, African American women have been portrayed as sexually promiscuous women who “both provoke and deserve abuse, sexual victimization, or both (Greene, 2000). It’s progressive then, that none of characters suffered from sexual assault or abuse or were portrayed as hypersexualized.

None of the characters had a lesbian or bisexual relationship, which shows a lack of diversity in that context. In *Liar* the issue was touched on when Micah and Sarah kissed following their mutual love interest’s funeral. Until this point in the story, both characters had firmly identified as straight. But after the kiss, it was viewed by both as a symptom of the grieving process as opposed to an actual lesbian experience. After the experience, neither character identified as lesbian or bisexual:

“What happened, it was...I didn’t...I did...I liked it. It felt good. I wish we would do it again. But I don’t know how it happened. Sarah can’t really have meant to return to my kiss...It was something else overwhelming us. Grief. We were trying to find traces of Zach in the layers of our skin.”

Not only that, there were no LGBT characters anywhere in the books analyzed. Though it is extremely difficult to quantitatively measure sexuality since many who identify as LGBT may not be forthcoming due to social stigma (Ohlheiser, 2012), Gallup recently conducted a survey to determine how many Americans self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (Gallup, 2012). They found that non-white Americans are more likely to identify as LGBT than white Americans and that 4.6 percent of African

Americans identify as LGBT, more than any other minority group. Also, 6.8 percent of Americans aged 18-29 identified themselves as LGBT, more than any other age group. It can be inferred that younger generations are more comfortable coming out than older generations. From this data, more and more African American young people are identifying as LGBT; young adult literature needs to reflect this change by having more African American adolescent characters that identify as lesbian, bisexual or transgendered.

An interesting trend was that though many of the female characters studied had boy problems, usually due to interference from another girl, the females overcame these problems by addressing them with the rival females. The idea of the “vindictive, hypersexualized” African American woman that Stovall described is not found in the books studied. Darcy Wills in *A Matter of Trust* becomes jealous when her former friend Bisana Meeks starts spending time with Darcy’s boyfriend. She is at first angry with Brisana, but eventually confronts her on the matter and the two make up. In *Mare’s Way*, Tali is concerned that her best friend is hitting on Tali’s crush while she is on a road trip with her family. Tali complains to her sister about it, but eventually calls her friend and they reach a peaceful resolution. Though the characters that are having boy problems may display moments of anger, pettiness, and jealousy during the course of some of the stories, in the end they always chose to politely confront their rivals and work out the problems rather peacefully.

Implications for Future Study and Conclusions

Due to the small sample of titles studied, further analysis needs to be conducted on more titles to gain a better understanding of how African American female

adolescents are portrayed in contemporary young adult fiction. This study only analyzed titles that were marketed towards African American youth or advertised as featuring African American characters; it would be interesting to see how this type of character is portrayed in other young adult literature aimed at Caucasian adolescents. Also, there are many other urban high school series like the Bluford High books, like the Drama High series and Kimani Tru series. Another study could look at titles in these series and see if they confirm the findings from this study. Finally, due to the low number of titles suggested by the CCBC, further studies could look at a similar organization, possibly ALA's Best Books, for contemporary titles featuring African American female adolescents.

Studies have shown that adolescents gravitate towards reading contemporary fiction and that females in particular like to read titles with characters like themselves. However, there is a lack of titles available to African American teen girls that contain characters like themselves. Due to that dearth, it is essential to know what kinds of trends exist in the available portrayals.

This study has found that there is a lack of contemporary young adult titles featuring African American female adolescents. However, those that do have this kind of character as the main character portray African American female adolescents as complex and multidimensional, which is an accomplishment in contrast to the ways African American female adolescents have been portrayed in the past. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for supporting African American female adolescent characters. This kind of character fell into one of four roles in the books: the sister role, the object of desire

role, the expositor role, or the moral compass role. These supporting characters were underdeveloped and seem to exist only in service to the plot.

Also, there is a lack of sexual orientation diversity in the titles studied. If teens are looking for reflections of themselves in the books that they read, lesbian and bisexual African American adolescents will not be able to see themselves in the books. There is also a lack of diversity among socioeconomic status. In recent years more and more African Americans are migrating from predominantly black or mixed inner-city locations to the suburbs. Yet, in the books looked at most of the characters lived in urban settings and were poor to lower middle class.. Readers not in this economic bracket or setting might have trouble relating to the characters.

It is essential that librarians and educators turn a critical eye towards the young adult literature their students are reading and make sure that the titles they provide in the library and the classroom feature well-rounded, complex characters that their students can relate to. Also, they need to teach their students to have their own critical consciousness regarding how race is portrayed in the fiction they read.

Appendix A

Davis, T. (2009). *Mare's way*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.

Tali and Octavia are two bickering sisters forced to accompany their grandmother on a road trip from their home in California to a family reunion in Alabama. Along the way, their grandmother regales them with stories of her time spent in the 6888th African American battalion of the Women's Army Corps during World War II.

Characters analyzed: Octavia Boylen (POV), Tali Boylen

Flake, S. (2001). *Money Hungry*. New York, NY: Hyperion Books for Children.

Raspberry Hill is terrified of being homeless after she and her mom were forced to live on the streets when she was younger. To prevent that from happening again, Raspberry is "money hungry" and is constantly thinking up get rich schemes and dragging her three best friends along.

Characters analyzed: Raspberry Hill (POV), Zora Mitchell, Ja'nae, and Mai

Jones, T. (2011). *Silhouetted by the blue*. Harrisonburg, VA: RR Donnelley & Sons Company.

After her mother's death, Serena Shaw has been taking on extra responsibilities around her house. Her father has sunk into a deep depression and is incapable of caring for Serena and her younger brother. Serena struggles to keep up with her new responsibilities, juggle her schoolwork and her lead role in the school musical and hide her father's depression from everyone.

Characters analyzed: Serena Shaw (POV), Candice Rudolph, Nikka, Cat

Langan, P. (2002). *The Bully*. West Berlin, NJ: Townsend Press.

New kid Darrell Mercer finds himself being bullied immediately by Tyray Hobbs on his first day at Bluford High. Small for his age, Darrell cannot defend himself against Tyray, and is forced to pay him off once a week in exchange for being left alone. Darrell hopes that joining the wrestling team will give him the confidence and strength to stand up to Tyray.

Characters analyzed: Amberlynn Bailey, Jamee Wills

Langan, P. (2002). *The Gun*. West Berlin, NJ: Townsend Press.

Former bully Tyray Hobbs is looking for revenge against Darrell Mercer, who publically embarrassed him at school. Looking to reclaim his intimidating reputation at school, Tyray looks to purchase a gun to assert his control over Darrell.

*This title was reprinted as *Payback*.

Characters analyzed: Amberlynn Bailey, Jamee Wills, and Lark Collins

Larbalestier, J. (2009). *Liar*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.

Teenager Micah Wilkins is a self-described liar whose “after hours” boyfriend has been found murdered in Central Park. Micah faces rumors and bullying at school as she tries to figure out what happened to Zach.

Characters analyzed: Micah Wilkins (POV), Sarah Washington

Myers, W. (2008). *Game*. New York, NY: Harper Teen.

Senior Drew Lawson is playing his final season of high school basketball. The book follows him and his teammates throughout the season as they deal with the pressures of making it to the championships, and with it, to a better life through college scholarships.

Characters analyzed: Jocelyn Larson

Myers, W. (2010). *Lockdown*. New York, NY: Amistad.

Reese Anderson is facing his final months in a juvenile detention facility for stealing prescription pads for a neighborhood drug dealer. Knowing he will soon be back on the streets facing the same pressures that got him locked up in the first place, Reese struggles with figuring out what his options are and how he can avoid going back to prison.

Characters analyzed: Isis “Icy” Anderson

Schraff, A. (2002). *Lost and Found*. West Berlin, NJ: Townsend Press.

Sixteen-year-old Darcy Wills is in over her head dealing with an absentee father, a mean lab partner, her first relationship, and a stalker.

Characters analyzed: Darcy Wills (POV), Jamee Wills, Tarah Carson, Brisana Meeks

Schraff, A. (2002). *A Matter of Trust*. West Berlin, NJ: Townsend Press.

Darcy Wills has started hanging out with new friends, leaving her old best friend Brisana on her own. Brisana retaliates by going after Darcy’s new boyfriend Hakeem. In a subplot, Darcy is dealing with the family stress of her grandmother’s dementia and her father’s reappearance.

Characters analyzed: Darcy Wills (POV), Tarah Carson, Brisana Meeks, Jamee Wills

Schraff, A. (2002). *Secrets in the Shadows*. West Berlin, NJ: Townsend Press.

After falling for the new girl, Roylin Bailey is determined to impress her by buying her an expensive necklace. Lacking the necessary funds, Roylin finds himself stealing from his friendly elderly neighbor, which kicks off a series of escalating events that has Roylin fearing for his life.

Characters analyzed: Amberlynn Bailey, Korie Archer, Tarah Carson, Darcy Wills, Brisana Meeks

Schraff, A. (2002). *Someone to Love Me*. West Berlin, NJ: Townsend Press.

Cindy Gibson embarks on her first relationship with bad boy Bobby Wallace. Ignoring her friends' warnings that Bobby is abusive and controlling, Cindy continues to date Bobby and soon finds herself in a dangerous situation. In a subplot, the book also focuses on Cindy's relationship with her negligent mother.

Characters analyzed: Cindy Gibson (POV), Jamee Wills, Amberlynn Bailey, Darcy Wills

Appendix B

Basic Book Information:

Title:

Author:

Race of Author:

Gender of Author:

Year published:

Setting of novel:

Basic Character Information:

Character's name:

Age:

Descriptors used in book about race:

Self-concept:

Socioeconomic status:

Markers of status:

Hobbies:

Job:

Enrolled in school?:

Described and/or demonstrates intelligence?:

Crime and Aggression:

Does the character witness a crime (violent and/or non-violent)?

Is so, are there lasting effects on the character?

Does the character commit a crime (violent and/or non-violent)?

If so, are there consequences?

Does the character commit an act of aggression or become verbally aggressive?

Is the character a victim of aggression, act or verbally?

Does the character do drugs? Drink? Smoke?

If so, are there consequences to these actions?

Stressors:

Does the character have stress in her home life? If so, what?

Does the character have stress in her school life? If so, what?

Does the character have stress among her friends? With her significant other?

Does the character have stress in any of her after school activities?

How does the character deal with these stressors?

Family/Home Life:

Does the character have a relationship with her mother? Father? Are both present in the household?

What do her parents do for a living?

Do either of the parents have a history of drug abuse? Has either of the parents ever been incarcerated?

Does she have any siblings? If so, is the relationship with the sibling(s) positive or negative? Does she have a relationship(s) with extended family members? What is her home like? Does she live in an apartment? House? Does she have her own room?

Aspirations/Dreams:

What are her dreams for the present? Future?

Does she work towards attaining these dreams, or are they handed to her?

Does she have any dreams for after high school? College? A future occupation? Is she actively working towards these dreams?

Love Relationships:

Does the character have an significant other? Boyfriend or girlfriend? If neither, does she display any interest (i.e. a crush)?

Is she sexually active?

Does she have problems in her relationship? If so, how is that conflict resolved?

Role in story:

How do other characters in the story perceive the character? Is she well-liked?

Is she a main character or a supporting character?

How often does she appear in the story?

When she does appear, what is her role? Does she talk about herself, or is her appearance in the service of others?

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